

Message Text

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SUBJECT: IMPLICATIONS OF CHOU EN-LAI'S DEATH

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1. MISSION MAY DRAW ON FOLLOWING IN ANY DISCUSSION OF

CHINA WHICH MAY TAKE PLACE IN NAC, JANUARY 14.

2. CHOU EN-LAI'S DEATH ON JANUARY 8 AFTER A LONG STRUGGLE WITH CANCER USHERS IN THE CHINESE SUCCESSION PROCESS. IN IMMEDIATE TERMS, HIS PASSING IS UNLIKELY TO HAVE ANY SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE PRC'S CURRENT DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICIES, INCLUDING RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES. VICE PREMIER TENG HSIAO-P'ING HAS BEEN AUTHORITATIVELY FUNCTIONING AS THE DE FACTO HEAD OF THE PRC GOVERNMENTAL APPARATUS FOR NEARLY A YEAR, AND IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT CHOU WAS ABLE TO PLAY EVEN A BEHIND THE SCENES ROLE DURING THE TERMINAL PHASE OF HIS ILLNESS, WHICH DATES FROM AT LEAST LAST SEPTEMBER. TENG, THEREFORE, HAS HAD SOME TIME TO PREPARE FOR THE SUCCESSION TO CHOU, AND THE CHINESE BODY POLITIC HAS BEEN CONDITIONED TO THIS SITUATION. IN FACT, WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT CHOU'S CANCER WAS DISCOVERED AS EARLY AS 1972, IT CAN REASONABLY BE SPECULATED THAT CHOU'S FATAL ILLNESS MAY HAVE BEEN A CRITICAL FACTOR IN THE DECISION TO REHABILITATE TENG IN 1973 AND GROOM HIM FOR THE SUCCESSION.

3. NEVERTHELESS, OVER THE INTERMEDIATE TERM, CHOU'S DEATH COULD HAVE LESS PREDICTABLE CONSEQUENCES. CHOU HAS ESTABLISHED A POSITION SECOND ONLY TO THAT OF CHAIRMAN MAO IN CHINESE COMMUNIST HISTORY, AND HIS PERSONAL INFLUENCE AND PRESTIGE WITHIN THE GOVERNMENTAL BUREAUCRACY WERE UNMATCHED, AS WAS HIS CAPACITY FOR COMPROMISE AND ACCOMMODATION. WHILE TENG CAN PROBABLY CONTINUE TO GOVERN EFFECTIVELY AS LONG AS MAO REMAINS ON THE SCENE, HE DOES NOT COMMAND THE RESPECT CHOU DID IN PERFORMING THE DEMANDING DUTIES OF THE PREMIERSHIP. NOR DOES HE HAVE CHOU'S TACT AND FINESSE IN DEALING WITH MAO OR IN BALANCING MAO'S REVOLUTIONARY DICTUMS WITH THE PRACTICAL REQUIREMENTS OF RUNNING A LARGE AND COMPLEX COUNTRY. ASIDE FROM TENG'S BLUNT STYLE, HIS PAST POLITICAL TROUBLES MAY ALSO MAKE HIM MORE VULNERABLE TO THE SUBDUED POLITICAL INFIGHTING THAT MAY MARK THE SUCCESSION PROCESS NOW UNDERWAY.

4. TENG'S FIRST TEST WILL BE WHETHER HE CAN PROMPTLY
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ASSUME THE PREMIERSHIP AND PROJECT AN IMAGE OF BUSINESS AS USUAL. HE FACES THE RISK THAT IN SEEKING TO CONSOLIDATE HIS HOLD ON THE PREMIERSHIP HE MAY HAVE TO MAKE CONCESSIONS TO POTENTIAL RIVALS THAT WILL STRENGTHEN THEIR ABILITY TO CHALLENGE HIM ON MAO'S DEATH, WHICH MAY NOT BE LONG IN COMING. AS PREMIER, FOR EXAMPLE, TENG MAY NOT BE ABLE TO RETAIN HIS POSITION AS CHIEF OF STAFF OF THE ARMED FORCES, AND THERE HAVE ALREADY BEEN RUMORS

THAT CHEN HSI-LIEN, UNTIL NOW THE INFLUENTIAL COMMANDER OF THE PEKING MILITARY REGION, MAY BE SLATED FOR THIS POSITION.

5. ON THE PARTY SIDE, CHOU WAS THE THIRD MEMBER OF THE POWERFUL STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE CCP POLITBURO TO DIE IN LESS THAN A YEAR. MOREOVER, TWO OF THESE (CHOU EN-LAI AND KANG SHENG) WERE ALSO PARTY VICE CHAIRMEN, AND THE YOUTHFUL SHANGHAI-BASED WANG HUNG-WEN NOW TECHNICALLY OCCUPIES THE NUMBER TWO POSITION IN THE PARTY AS THE NOMINAL FIRST VICE CHAIRMAN AFTER MAO. THE MANNER IN WHICH THE PARTY IS RESTRUCTURED WILL PROVIDE IMPORTANT CLUES TO THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF TENG'S POSITION.

6. AT THE SAME TIME, IF TENG'S PERSONAL QUALITIES ARE DIFFERENT FROM THOSE OF CHOU, HE HAS AMPLY DEMONSTRATED HIS CAPACITY FOR LEADERSHIP AND CAN BE EXPECTED TO MOVE SKILLFULLY TO CONSOLIDATE HIS OWN POSITION. WHILE THIS TASK MAY NOT BE EASY, THE MOST LIKELY SHORT TERM PROSPECT

IS FOR A RELATIVELY SMOOTH SUCCESSION PROCESS.

7. OVER THE LONGER TERM, THE PASSING OF A MAJOR FIGURE LIKE CHOU IS BOUND TO HAVE IMPACT, EVEN THOUGH WE CANNOT FORESEE ITS SHAPE.

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